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ABSTRACT

One hundred and twelve Caucasian mothers (recently separated from their husbands) and their children (6-12 years old) who were participating in a larger longitudinal study of the effects of parental divorce on families were interviewed and completed psychological measures about coping and parenting. Based on mothers' responses to a parenting attitudes questionnaire, two factors were selected which measured openness to communication (open expression factor) and hostility (hostility factor). These factors were found to be related to mothers' and children's reports of physical and mental health, and to qualitative aspects of their relationship as measured in a videotaped play observation session (play interaction). The scores of mothers of sons vs. daughters did not significantly differ for either the open expression factor or the hostility factor. Mothers who rated themselves high on the open expression factor were more supportive and their children responded more positively to them. Conversely, mothers who rated themselves high on the hostility factor were less interactive, at least with boys, and their sons were non-interactive or negative in turn. Parenting attitudes were also related to mothers' self-reports of adjustment, to their ratings of their children's adjustment, and even to their children's self-reports. The direction of effect is unclear, but the issues that surround mother-son relationships are clearly shown to differ from those surrounding mother-daughter relationships. (BJD)

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SOME CORRELATES OF CHILD-REARING ATTITUDES

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Abstract

One hundred and twelve recently separated mothers and their children were interviewed and completed a number of psychological measures about coping and parenting. Based on mothers' responses to a parenting attitudes questionnaire, two factors were selected which measured openness of communication and hostility. These factors were found to be related to mothers' and children's reports of physical and mental health, and to qualitative aspects of their relationship as measured in a videotaped play observation session. Reciprocity between the behavior and attitudes of mothers and children is discussed.

Statement of Problem

The interplay between child-rearing attitudes (e.g. preferred discipline methods, acceptability of emotional expression, feelings about parental responsibilities) and a) the quality of mother-child relationships, and b) mental and physical health is important to understand in order to be able to use such attitudes as predictors of children's emotional development.

Subjects

Subjects were 112 Caucasian mother-child pairs participating in a larger longitudinal study of the effects of parental divorce on families. The children were six to twelve years old. Mothers and children were individually interviewed about the divorce and completed a number of questionnaires.

Measures

All mothers completed the Block Child Rearing Practices Report (Block, 1965), a 50-item questionnaire designed to assess parenting attitudes. Mothers rated each item on a 7-point scale (from "very uncharacteristic of the way you raise your child" to "very characteristic of the way you raise your child").

Other self-report measures completed by the mothers included: 1) The Profile of Mood States (POMS) (McNair, Lorr and Droppleman, 1971), an affect adjective checklist assessing predominant affective states such as confusion, tension, hostility, and depression, 2) a measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and 3) a report of psychological/physical symptoms (Gurin, Veroff and Feld, 1960). Mothers also

completed two measures concerning their children: 1) a measure of the child's physical illness symptoms, and 2) the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1978) which was broken down into six subscales (see Table 2) and two general factors, "Internalizing" and "Externalizing." Last, the children completed the following self-report measures: 1) the cognitive and social scales of the Harter Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1979), administered orally, and 2) three-point scales of anger, fault, sadness, and confusion about the parental divorce.

A subsample of 62 mother-child pairs also were videotaped in a structured play setting. Each session consisted of three 10-minute sections: a) free play with preselected toys, b) tower building while the child was blindfolded, and c) making puppets from paper bags or socks. Videotapes were later coded using the Response Class Matrix (Mash, Terdal and Anderson, 1973) system. In this time-sampling system, two coders record the behavior of the mother and child every 15 seconds. One codes the mother's behavior as an antecedent to the child's behavior; the other codes the child's behavior as an antecedent to the mother's behavior. Categories of behavior included praise, question, negative, interaction (neutral statements or silent play together), and no interaction (ignoring or parallel play). Inter-judge reliability above 80% was obtained prior to coding the videotapes.

Results

Two different groups of items from Block's questionnaire were selected to describe parents' (a) openness of affection and communication (hereafter called the Open Expression factor), and (b) feelings of hostility (called the Hostility factor). Items are listed below. Chronbach's alpha reliability co-effecient for each group of items was .83 and .58 respectively. Each subject received a summary score for each of these factors, which were, in turn, compared with data from the play observations and self-report measures. Pearson product-moment correlations are reported in Tables 1 and 2. With the exception of the data concerning the relationship between mothers' parenting attitudes and their other self-report measures (where sex of participating child is less clearly relevant), correlations are reported for

boys and girls separately. The scores of mothers of sons vs. daughters did not significantly differ for either the Open Expression factor (boys M = 6.13, SD = .90; girls M = 6.23, SD = .54; t = .61, df = 94, n.s.) or the Hostility factor (boys M = 3.92, SD = 1.02; girls M = 4.10, SD = .99; t = .88, df = 95, n.s.).

Play Interaction. (See Table 1.) First it should be noted that mothers' parenting attitudes were much more consistently related to their play interactions with their sons than their daughters. Mothers with higher Open Expression scores praised their daughters more during tower-building and their daughters ignored them less during the puppet project. No other play behaviors were related to that attitude score or to the hostility factor score.

In contrast, both attitude factors were related to play interaction for boys. Sons whose mothers had higher Open Expression scores asked fewer questions, interacted (in a neutral way) more, and were less negative in response to their mothers during free play. Mothers with higher Hostility scores ignored their sons (and were ignored by them) more during free play. During tower-building, these mothers and their sons interacted neutrally less often. And during the puppet project, mothers with higher Hostility scores praised their sons less, and their sons interacted neutrally less often, ignored their mothers more, and were negative in response to their interactive mothers more often.

Adjustment. (See Table 2.) Mothers who rated themselves high in Open Expression also rated themselves as being less confused or bewildered and as having higher self-esteem. High Hostility scores were related to higher numbers of symptoms endorsed on Gurin's Symptom Checklist.

Mothers' scores on Open Expression were not related to how they rated boys. Hostility scores, on the other hand, were positively correlated with the Externalizing scales of hyperactivity, aggression, and delinquency for boys, as rated on the Child Behavior Checklist. Girls, on the other hand, were rated as having fewer Internalizing disorders and physical illnesses by mothers who rated themselves high in Open Expression. Mothers' Hostility scores were related to their ratings of girls' depression and aggression.

Finally, the most distant link between parent attitude and child outcome was examined through the children's self-reports. Mothers high in Hostility had sons and daughters who reported having many symptoms on Gurin's checklist. The Hostility score was also related to lower perceived competence and high self-attribution of fault concerning the divorce for girls. The Open Expression factor was related to less anger about the divorce in boys.

Discussion

These data were collected 3 to 8 months after parental separation and, as such, may be thought to reflect relationships under stressful conditions. They may, on the other hand, be generally descriptive of parenting styles. One-year follow-up data, currently being collected, will allow us to examine differences in being under acute vs. less acute stress.

Observations of mothers and children revealed interesting relationships between behavior during play and parenting attitudes. Mothers who rated themselves high on the Open Expression factor were, indeed, more supportive and their children responded more positively to them. Conversely, mothers who rated themselves high on the Hostility factor were less interactive, at least with boys, and their sons were non-interactive or negative in turn. The causal direction is, of course, not assessable from these data: perhaps mothers with interactive children have, as a result of their good relationship, come to adopt more positive attitudes toward child-rearing; the opposite could be true of mothers with non-interactive children. On the other hand parenting attitudes may determine mothers' styles of behavior, with consequences for the children's response. Probably both occur.

Parenting attitudes were also related, in the expected directions, to mothers' self-reports of adjustment, to their ratings of their children's adjustment, and even to their children's self-reports.

It is interesting that mothers' parenting attitudes had a more pronounced effect on the interactions of boys than girls. When interacting with sons, mothers seemed to show more correspondance between attitude and behavior than they did when interacting with daughters. It is not clear whether this is because of the specific

nature of a mother-son relationship at the time of a divorce, or more generally because sons' behavior more strongly influences their mothers' attitudes (or vice versa) than does that of daughters.

When mothers were describing their children's adjustment, a sex difference in patterns was also found. The Hostility factor was related to boys' Externalizing problems; the Open Expression factor was more related to Internalizing or illness problems in girls. Again, the direction of effect is unclear but the issues that surround mother-son relationships are clearly shown to differ from those surrounding mother-daughter ones.

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Open Expression

1. I talk it over and reason with my child when he/she misbehaves.
2. I trust my child to behave as he/she should, even when I am not with him/her.
3. I joke and play with my child.
4. I encourage my child to be curious, to explore and question things.
5. I make sure my child knows that I appreciate what he/she tries or accomplishes.
6. I encourage my child to talk about his/her troubles.
7. I make sure I know where my child is and what he/she is doing.

Hostility

1. I often feel angry with my child.
2. I believe physical punishment to be the best way of disciplining.
3. I expect a great deal of my child.
4. I teach my child that he/she is responsible for what happens to him/her.
5. I let my child know how ashamed and disappointed I am when he/she misbehaves.

Table 1

Correlations Between Parenting Attitudes and Play Interaction Codes

	Boys		Girls	
	Open Expression	Hostility	Open Expression	Hostility
Free Play				
Mo Praise	.04	-.10	.21	.15
Mo Interaction	.08	-.24	.00	.07
Mo No Interaction	-.22	.40a	-.35	.17
Ch Question	-.45a	.08	-.13	.05
Ch Interaction	.41a	-.36	.30	.12
Ch No Interaction	-.32	.38a	-.23	.07
Mo Interaction: Ch Negative	-.45a	.33	-.05	-.18
Tower				
Mo Praise	.12	.18	.48a	-.11
Mo Interaction	.06	-.39a	-.37	.29
Mo No Interaction	-.01	-.04	.12	.16
Ch Question	-.03	.08	.00	.37
Ch Interaction	.13	-.48a	-.34	-.01
Ch No Interaction	-.05	.16	.27	.21
Mo Interaction: Ch Negative	-.02	.24	.14	.05
Puppet				
Mo Praise	.34	-.47a	.09	.06
Mo Interaction	.13	-.15	.10	.01
Mo No Interaction	-.24	.33	-.27	.29
Ch Question	.01	-.13	-.06	.13
Ch Interaction	.26	-.40a	.35	-.33
Ch No Interaction	-.29	.56b	-.61b	.31
Mo Interaction: Ch Negative	-.28	.51b	-.43	.37

a p .05

b p .01

Table 2

Correlations Between Parenting Attitudes and Mother and Child Adjustment

Mother's Self-Descriptions

	Open Expression	Hostility
Profile of Mood States		
Angry/Hostile	-.14	.08
Confused/Bewildered	-.21[a]	.13
Depressed/Dejected	-.13	.06
Tense/Anxious	-.17	.08
Rosenberg's Self Esteem	.28[b]	-.08
Gurin's Symptom Checklist	-.06	.24[a]

Mother's Description of Child

	Boys		Girls	
	Open Expression	Hostility	Open Expression	Hostility
Child Behavior Checklist				
Depressed	.03	.19	-.17	.31[a]
Somatic	-.15	.17	-.31[a]	.06
Quiet	-.22	-.06	-.34[a]	.20
Hyperactive	-.16	.44[c]	-.02	.13
Aggressive	-.24	.51[c]	-.25	.34[a]
Delinquent	-.25	.42[b]	-.11	.29
Internalizing Total	-.08	.16	-.32[a]	.19
Externalizing Total	-.25	.53[c]	-.19	.30
Physical Illnesses	.05	.09	-.43[b]	.21

Child's Self-Description

	Boys		Girls	
	Open Expression	Hostility	Open Expression	Hostility
Gurin's Symptom Checklist	-.18	.38[b]	-.03	.37[a]
Harter's Perceived Competence				
Cognitive	-.08	.08	.17	-.35[a]
Social	-.03	.08	.12	-.29
Reactions to Divorce				
Angry	-.31[a]	-.01	-.13	.19
Self-attribution of fault	-.16	.02	-.19	.50[b]
Sad	-.10	.10	-.13	.06
Confused	-.11	-.18	-.08	.02

[a] $p < .05$
[b] $p < .01$
[c] $p < .001$